

SHEEP HEALTH

Fact Sheet . . . No. 1



CONTAGIOUS ECTHYMA (Sore Mouth)

Contagious ecthyma (CE), also known as sore mouth or orf, is an acute infectious disease of sheep characterized by the formation of vesicles, pustules, and finally thick scabs on the lips, nostrils, face, eyelids, teats, udders, feet, and occasionally inside the mouth. The disease is widespread in the sheep population and affects all breeds. Lambs are generally more susceptible than adults.

CE causes reduced gain and feed efficiency in feeder-lambs. It is most serious when nursing lambs contract the disease. Affected lambs refuse to nurse and may die from starvation. The infection may be transmitted to the teats and udders of ewes, causing pain and abandonment of lambs. Mastitis may also result.

Contagious ecthyma is caused by a virus that is a member of the poxvirus group. This virus can survive for very long periods in scabs of infected sheep that drop into the bedding and environment. This may serve as a source of infection for sheep many months later.

About two to three days after exposure to the virus, vesicles, pustules, and finally scabs appear on the lips, nostrils, and other affected areas. The scabs last from one to two weeks. Resulting pain causes reduced feed consumption and subsequent economic loss. The disease can resemble ulcerative dermatosis, sheep pox, and *Staphylococcus dermatitis*. A veterinarian should examine flocks suspected of having CE.

Treatment of CE is not rewarding, as the disease must run its course. Application of broadspectrum antibiotic ointment to affected areas is commonly used, but has little effect on the course of the disease. Carefully observe ewes nursing affected lambs for evidence of teat lesions and mastitis.

Vaccination for CE is a relatively simple procedure and should be done routinely in all but completely isolated flocks. The disease is commonly introduced into a sheep flock by replacement ewes or breeding rams and by contact with bedding material, trucks, and vehicles contaminated by the CE virus. The vaccine is a live, virulent (disease producing) virus that causes the disease in a location on the body and at a time of the year when little or no damage is done. In most flocks, it is best to vaccinate ewes one to two months prior to lambing so antibodies in the colostrum will protect lambs through the nursing period. Vaccinate feeder lambs at weaning time. Purchased feeder lambs are usually vaccinated for CE, enterotoxemia, and other diseases on or shortly after arrival.

Vaccination is performed by scarifying (scratching) a small area in a woolless area of the body and "painting" the live virus on this area. Lambs are usually vaccinated on the inner thigh, ewes on the inner surface of the ear or behind the elbow. When an outbreak occurs, immediate vaccination of the entire flock is usually beneficial if no more than 10 to 20 percent of the flock is affected.

CE is transmissible to humans, causing painful sores that may last for several weeks. People handling infected sheep should wear rubber or plastic gloves. Thoroughly wash exposed skin areas and then apply a skin antiseptic such as 70 percent isopropyl alcohol. The infective virus enters through small cuts or abrasions. Keep small children away from infected sheep. The vaccine can also cause the disease in humans, so take care when using it.

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